

If You Have Hepatitis C (HCV) Infection



H C V E D U C A T I O N A L S E R I E S

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by a virus, called the hepatitis C virus or HCV for short. If you have hepatitis C, you are not alone. According to government estimates, almost 4 million people in the U.S. have been infected with HCV. Veterans seem to have a higher rate of HCV infection than others.

What are the symptoms of HCV?

The symptoms of HCV infection are usually very mild. In fact, you may not have any symptoms at all. Sometimes, people with HCV feel very tired or sick to their stomach. Even though HCV might not make you feel sick, it is still a serious illness. In most cases, HCV never goes away. Over time, it can cause other problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. Because it stays in your body, you can give HCV to someone else. See the heading below for more information on how you can protect other people from HCV.

How did I get infected with HCV?

You most likely got HCV when you came into contact with the blood of another infected person. Some of the ways this might have happened include:

- You had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992. Doctors did not know how to test donated blood and organs for HCV before 1992, so they had no way of protecting you from it.
- You had a *clotting factor problem*, and were given a blood product before 1987.
- You used a contaminated needle to inject drugs like heroin or cocaine, even if it was only once, many years ago.
- You were on long-term kidney dialysis.
- You were a health care worker and had contact with blood in the workplace, especially through needle stick injuries.
- Your mother had HCV when she gave birth to you.
- You had sex with a person infected with HCV or had many sex partners. While the risk of getting HCV by having sex is low, it is still possible.

How can I protect others from getting infected with HCV?

HCV is mainly spread through the blood. You can't give HCV to someone else by sneezing, coughing, kissing, hugging or holding hands, or by sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, food or water. You can't give HCV to your baby by breast-feeding. To protect others from getting HCV, follow these common sense rules.

- Do not donate blood, body organs, tissues or sperm.
- Do not let anyone else use your razor, toothbrush or other personal care items.
- Cover open cuts or sores on your skin with a bandage until they have healed.

- If you shoot drugs, talk with your doctor about trying to stop. If you can't stop, don't ever share your needles or works with anyone else.
- Practice safer sex. While it is difficult to transmit HCV in most sexual situations, it is not impossible. Use a condom or other latex barrier to provide the most protection, especially if you have sex with more than one person. Using condoms also reduces your chances of catching other hepatitis viruses and HIV.

How can I keep HCV from causing serious damage to my liver?

The symptoms of HCV infection are mild, but over time, the virus can cause permanent damage to your liver. You can help prevent this damage from getting serious by following your doctor's advice. That advice will probably include the following:

- **DO NOT DRINK ALCOHOL.** Alcohol damages your liver even when you are healthy. Drinking alcohol when you have HCV makes the damage much worse. Remember, there is no "safe" amount of alcohol you can drink when you have HCV. Nor does it make any difference if you switch from "hard" liquor to beer, cider or wine. If you think that it might be hard to stop drinking alcohol, talk to your doctor.
- **Get vaccinated against other hepatitis viruses.** Having one form of hepatitis doesn't mean that you can't get any of the others. Talk to your doctor about getting shots to protect you from hepatitis A and B.
- **Avoid taking medicines, supplements, natural or herbal remedies that might cause even more damage to your liver.** Even ordinary pain relievers can cause liver problems in some very sensitive people. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before you take any natural or herbal remedy, supplement, prescription or over the counter medicine.
- **Ask your doctor about tests to see if your liver has already been damaged by HCV.** These tests might include a *liver biopsy*, a procedure that allows your doctor to examine a very small part of your liver for signs of trouble.
- **Ask your doctor about treatments.** Some of the treatments for HCV include interferon, and interferon combined with ribavarin. Find out about your options, and discuss any questions with your doctor.
- **Get involved with organizations or support groups for HCV in your area.** If you need help finding one, ask your doctor, or contact one of the groups listed below.

For more information and support call

- Your local VA Health Care facility and the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C web site (Internet address: <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisc>)
- The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line (1-888-4 HEP CDC or 1-888-443-7232) and web site (Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>)
- The American Liver Foundation 1-888-4HEP USA or 1-800-GO LIVER.
Internet address: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>



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